

Hospitality – the heart of discipleship

Matthew 10:40-42

Our Bible Text for this morning is Matthew 10:40-42. These verses come at the end of Jesus' missionary discourse to his disciples – verses 5-42 of the 10th chapter of Matthew.

In those passages that we've looked at over the past few weeks, Jesus has been talking about what the disciples should do and the difficulties that they will face - what others will do to them because of their witness for Christ. Jesus is teaching them about hospitality in the context of discipleship.

Let's listen to the passage now: *"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."*

These verses speak about Hospitality as receiving and welcoming the stranger. In this text, Jesus reminds us of a very profound privilege and a tremendous responsibility. He tells us that we represent him in the presence of others. And conversely, others represent him before us.

Jesus assures us that he himself is present in our lives when we welcome others into our midst. And that He is also present when others do the same for us.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: "The bearers of Jesus' word receive a final word of promise for their work. They are now Christ's fellow workers and will be like him in all things.

Thus they are to meet those to whom they are sent as if they were Christ himself. When they are welcomed into a house, Christ enters with them. They are bearers of his presence. They bring with them the most precious gift in the world, the gift of Jesus Christ."

"And with them they bring God the Father, and that means indeed forgiveness and salvation, life and blessing. That is the reward of their toil and suffering. Every service people give them is service provided to Christ himself."

We bring Christ before others in our homes, in the church, in school, at work, at play, in the whole world. What would happen if, every day, we were always conscious of this truth and did our best to put it into practice? When we offer and receive hospitality - Jesus is made present. This truly is the most precious gift we could give to anyone!

Most of us probably don't find it too difficult to offer hospitality to our family and friends, but what about the stranger, the youth skateboarding in our parking lot, the neighbor we meet across the back lane, the fellow worker that speaks a different language or holds a different political view, the fellow student in a wheel chair?

How often do we welcome these and similar people who have fallen through the cracks or who are labeled outcasts in our society? Do we give them the gift of Christ's presence? Or do we say to ourselves, they have their own people who look out for them? I don't want to mess with them...

Hospitality is risky business. An open heart and an open home can be a target for unpleasant experiences. But, it can also be the recipient of unexpected surprises.

Hospitality, however isn't only about going some place and quietly hoping that the receiver of our hospitality will see Christ in us.

I remember one of my seminary professors talking about a fundamental truth about hospitality. He said, "Always remember when you're going on a pastoral call, especially when it's a difficult situation, that you shouldn't expect to bring Christ to the situation. Christ is already there." What a profound truth. Sometimes we do good to see Christ in the people that we want to reach out to.

Theologian Kosuke Koyama was spot on when he observed: "Our society, even the religious community, works on the basis of mutual invitation. Lutherans invite Lutherans (Mennonites invite Mennonites – for that matter). As long as we conduct ourselves in such a way, we have the convenience of speaking our own religious and cultural language. Intellectually and spiritually we live comfortably.

But Jesus is not enthusiastic about it. The real meaning of hospitality is found in inviting someone who cannot repay you, someone who is unfamiliar to you. Then the concept of invitation ~ hospitality ~ receives a Christ related meaning. Christ is the Hospitality of God toward us. He invites all of us, from all languages and cultures, to His great banquet, the feast which none of us can repay."

God gives Himself fully to us in His Son Jesus Christ. In fact, He did not spare His own life in order to show us how much He wants us to be with him for all eternity. But God doesn't just give Himself fully to us. He also fully receives us and accepts us as we are.

In Christ we experience both sides of the coin of God's hospitality toward us.

Church growth experts say that healthy and growing congregations are generally friendly churches that offer hospitality to others. They are churches that live by the principle that, *there are no strangers here, only friends whom we have not met.*

To be faithful disciples, and to represent God's heartbeat in our lives, we need to push the boundaries of what we find comfortable and easy. I can't express in words how proud it makes me feel to be a part of this church when I hear someone talk about the warm and friendly reception they had when they worshipped with us. Whether these are visitors from far away or regular attenders who have become members.

In an article titled, "Where Are the Visitors?" Lyle Schaller says, "The most influential question that can be asked of a first time visitor is, 'Would you like to come home with us for dinner?'" For those not interested in "Knocking on doors," Schaller notes, "Just open your door."

Now, you may be thinking to yourself, "Ok, we're getting close to line here... It's one thing to invite people to church, but a totally different thing to invite folks back to my home." And you'd be right...I'll be the first one to admit that.

But one of the lessons God has taught me in life is that **God shows His face in the most unexpected places.** God shows up and meets us with a cup of cold water in the midst of the chaos in our life. God speaks His eternal Word of hope in the poem of a child. God shows His face through a song that touches your soul and gives you the courage to go on. Jesus is present in the life of an older person offering an understanding smile to the teenager who is playing his music way too loud.

To be faithful disciples, we need to push the boundaries of what we find comfortable and easy. It'll be hard for many of us, but with God's help it isn't impossible. So the next time you give or receive hospitality, remember to rejoice in the other person's presence; remember that it may very well make all the difference in the world to the person who receives your hospitality. And remember the reverse is also true; someone may be the very presence of Christ for you in an unexpected time and place.

When you give and receive hospitality in the name of Christ, you stand in the presence of God Himself.